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A Rhetorical Quadriad For the Busy Politician

A politician with his ear to the ground should know when the tide is running against him. Last year, I used these columns to insist people stop obfuscating political arguments with metaphors about pointed daggers and soft underbellies.

Alas, not only did no one listen; things got worse. Even Jesse Helms (with whom I am sometimes aligned on critical issues such as adjournment *sine die* and when to take a Fourth of July recess) forsook me in his response to an official communiqué urging ambassadors not to campaign for his reelection. "That statement," Jesse riposted, "was prepared by the soft underbelly of the State Department that despises anyone who is trying to turn around the foreign policy of the federal government."

I understand why a soft underbelly would object to its parent body's being turned around, but when the soft underbellies begin preparing statements, it is time to admit I am outgunned and hang up my spikes. Since I am loath completely to abandon the study of political semantics, however, I have decided to emulate some modern scholars by moving from the normative to the descriptive school of linguistic analysis.

Listening to public debates, I have come to recognize four rhetorical concepts that govern much of what we say, and some of what we omit. Many producers of political rhetoric understand these techniques implicitly, while others, in Molierèsque fashion, speak them without realizing that they are doing so. To intelligent consumers of public speech, familiarity with this quadriad has the distinct advantage of greatly lessening the amount of attention that needs be paid to those employing them.

1) *The Reverse Houdini*: Harry Houdini became famous, and later dead, by inviting others to abuse him. The basic Houdini consisted of his having other people tie him in knots, and then going before the public and getting out of the knots. The reverse Houdini consists of a politician tying himself in knots, and then going before the public and saying, "Gee, I wish I could help you, but I can't because I'm all tied up in knots." This concept is frequently embodied in legislative rules that contain various devices by which it can be made to ap-

pear that many legislators are being restrained by someone from doing something which, in fact, they have absolutely no interest in doing.

The classic example of this came in 1981, when pro-Reagan members of the House voted for a rule prohibiting any amendments to the Gramm-Latta bill embodying the Reagan budget, and then explained to unhappy constituents that they had been forced to vote yes or no on the whole package because they weren't allowed to offer any amendments.

2) *The Elephant Stick*: I borrow here from the old joke in which a woman is walking around Dupont Circle with a large stick. Asked why, she replies that it keeps away elephants. When told that there are no elephants in Dupont Circle, she replies, "Aha—the stick works."

The political elephant stick consists of conjuring up something horrible and firmly declaring one's intention of preventing it from happening. It allows politicians to ascribe disastrous potential effects to measures they oppose, and then, when these disasters fail to befall us, to claim credit for staving them off, instead of having to apologize for making them up.

President Reagan probably feels that liberal Democrats are waving an elephant stick in warning that his Nicaragua policy could lead to American troop involvement there. (Of course, sometimes there really are elephants.)

3) *The Notsaposta*: This is pronounced as it is spelled, at least if you are now or ever were from New Jersey. (Notspoztuh is the southern variant.) The notsaposta is one of the words ideologues use to discipline people who stray from the straight and narrow. It works with great simplicity; once you have chosen your side in a dispute, you are notsaposta criticize anyone else on your team, nor indicate that there is any merit in the opposition case.

Thus some liberal opponents of aid to the *contras* have been told they are notsaposta criticize censorship by the Sandinistas. And some conservative opponents of government waste neglect the major current example of that phenomenon because they believe that they are notsaposta criticize the Pentagon.

The notsaposta rises above trivial considerations of right and wrong. Violators are not charged by their fiercer copartisans with error; they are taken to task for their fickleness. Solidarity, not accuracy, is the test.

A recent example is the book by Richard Cummings denouncing the late Al Lowenstein as a full-time CIA agent, despite the total absence of any evidence suggesting that this was true. The accusation turns out to be an inference by way of a notsaposta. To Cummings, passionate liberals like Lowenstein are notsaposta be strongly anticommunist, so Cummings reconciles Lowenstein's fight against apartheid and the war in Vietnam with Lowenstein's strong anticommunist record by deciding he must have been a CIA plant. (Pat Buchanan's anger at the 35 conservative House members who criticized South African racism may have looked like an application of the notsaposta from the right, but that is probably not true. Buchanan appears to be rather fond of apartheid and seems to have differed with its critics on the merits.)

4) *Looking Under the Street Light*: In this old joke, a man searching under a street light tells a questioner that he lost the object in question one block away. Asked further why he is looking for it here, he answers, "Because the light is better." This is the favored technique of ideologues who find it a better target of opportunity to harass those who differ with them only slightly than to wage battle against their more serious opponents who disagree with them in fundamental ways.

Thus, some critics of American nuclear policy have spent a good deal of time lately denouncing politicians who oppose the MX, the B1, aid to the *contras* and "Star Wars" because these same politicians will not insist on declaring the harbors of New York, Boston or San Francisco nuclear-free. Energies are diverted and ill feelings kindled among allies because it is more emotionally satisfying to attack a lack of absolute perfection in those near you than to face the hostility of those further across the spectrum.

This does not, of course, exhaust the list of rhetorical maneuvers that politicians find useful. But even candor has its limits, and I have to make a living too.

The writer is a Democratic representative from Massachusetts.